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ABSTRACT

This pamphlet discusses the role of play in the development of young children and the importance of avoiding placing young children exclusively in programs with a strong academic orientation. Presented in a question-answer format, the pamphlet includes information regarding: (1) the importance of providing opportunities for young children to learn how to learn rather than making them achieve specific academic accomplishments; (2) parents' motivations for enrolling their children in academically-oriented programs; (3) the difference between training and education; (4) how play builds a strong educational foundation, promotes love of learning and self-esteem, and facilitates interpersonal relationships; (5) how inadequate "horizontal" development--early learning that underlies all later learning--can result in unstable "vertical" development--learning that must build upon previous learning; (6) the importance of nurturing imagination and creativity; and (7) the role of adults in children's early development as partners and consultants in play. The pamphlet concludes with a biographical sketch of the author. (KB)

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THE *POWER* OF PLAY

A Discussion About Early Childhood Education

with

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"The Education for Parenthood Information Center"

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The Power of Play

A Discussion About
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With

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Little Rebecca lives with her mother and father in an affluent suburb. Her nursery is stocked with all the latest stimulation devices; and she spends much of her time in a high-tech crib that is placed in front of the television set so she can be exposed to "Sesame Street." Her parents set aside several hours every day for rigorous "learning sessions," during which they teach Rebecca to recognize numbers, letters, shapes, colors, and objects in pictures. Soon, they will enroll her in a special program where she will receive intensive instruction in reading, writing, math, and other academic subjects on a full-time basis.

It appears Rebecca is getting all the advantages and her parents are helping her to achieve a superb educational start in life. But that is not so according to Dr. Michael K. Meyerhoff, a world-renowned authority on early childhood education. His 25 years of research on early learning – including extensive studies with the Harvard Preschool Project and the state of Missouri's New Parents as Teachers Project – indicate that despite their good intentions, Rebecca's parents actually are preventing their child from becoming a bright, happy, competent student.

Dr. Meyerhoff notes that for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, having fun and learning are one and the same. Consequently, an alternative approach that is much less stressful will be far more successful in ensuring the best possible results. In the following discussion, he advises parents to avoid placing young children exclusively in programs with a strong academic orientation; and he urges them never to underestimate the power of play in promoting optimal educational development during the early years.

Rebecca's parents are trying to ensure she will be well-prepared to enter the formal school system in a few years – isn't that a good idea?

Their intentions are perfectly appropriate – it's just their orientation that is problematical. Like most mothers and fathers, Rebecca's parents want their child to be happy and to make the most of her learning potential during the first years of life. Unfortunately, by being too structured, pushing too hard, and focusing too closely on the content of her lessons, they have failed to realize what early education is really all about. Whether it's simple tasks such as reciting the alphabet or amazing feats such as quoting classic literature, paying too much attention to specific accomplishments often means ignoring what is truly essential.

What is truly essential during the early years?

Young children are learning all the time; and they are learning to do a lot of different things that may or may not include simple tasks and amazing feats like those mentioned above. But most importantly, they are "learning how to learn." As they indulge their natural inclinations to explore, investigate, and experiment through developmentally appropriate play, they acquire the fundamental concepts and capacities that allow them to effectively absorb from and adapt to the ever-changing environment around them for the rest of their lives.

Why is "learning to learn" more advantageous than specific academic accomplishments?

The finest students – those with whom teachers can work most efficiently and who continue to excel and improve with each passing year – are not characterized by their previous accomplishments, but rather by how prepared they are to meet whatever challenges are in store for them in the future. Therefore, from an educational standpoint, there is no doubt that young children who are permitted to develop fundamental concepts and capacities through developmentally appropriate play will be considerably better off in the long run than those whose learning experiences have been limited to rigorous instruction in specific academic areas.

What you are saying sounds nice, but do you have any evidence to support your position?

Plenty. When I was with the Harvard Preschool Project, the most extensive and comprehensive study of early learning ever performed, we used "deductive" rather than "inductive" reasoning. A lot of people come up with theories about how to educate young children, and then "induce" their methods will produce wonderful results. We, on the other hand, began our research by finding extraordinarily bright, well-adjusted, and highly competent students; and then we examined the kinds of experiences they had during their early years. After analyzing the data to see what they had in common, we were able to "deduce" that learning to learn through developmentally appropriate play was the key to optimal educational outcomes.

Is it possible the outstanding students were naturally smarter and most young children really do need academic training to do well in school?

That's a fair question; but again, we have plenty of evidence to the contrary. In studies such as the state of Missouri's "New Parents as Teachers" project, we took what we learned about the power of play and shared it with literally hundreds of first-time mothers and fathers from all sorts of socioeconomic, cultural, and educational backgrounds. When their children entered the formal school system later on, virtually all of them scored in the top percentile on whatever developmental exams were administered – and they continued to do so every subsequent year. Meanwhile, despite their interesting theories and special systems of instruction, there isn't a single academically-oriented program for young children that can make a similar claim.

Then why do so many parents enroll their children in academically-oriented programs?

Most mothers and fathers who take this approach have admirable motives. For one thing, they often are worried their child may be "wasting" precious time and missing out on many learning opportunities during the early years. They also may believe that if their child collects certain academic skills earlier than other

children, this will give her a competitive advantage when everyone enters the formal school system later on. And then sometimes they see the children of their friends and neighbors being enrolled in these special programs, and they are afraid their child will be "left behind" if they don't follow along. But whatever the reason, it is clear that although they mean well, they have been badly misguided.

Are you saying it is impossible to teach young children academic skills?

Of course not. If you employ elaborate, time-consuming techniques, you can teach a young child to do just about anything. For example, there are children enrolled in special programs who can identify pictures of all the presidents while still in diapers. However, there is no evidence to suggest that programs designed to produce such precocious academic performances provide young children with any genuine and enduring advantages. They may have been "trained" to perform various scholastic activities, but they really have not been "educated" in any meaningful way. Whatever "success" is achieved is largely superficial and fleeting; and by the time everyone is in elementary school, they ordinarily are not functioning in a fashion that is in any way "superior" to children who were introduced to these types of activities at a more traditional age.

What is the difference between training and education?

Training concentrates on instilling specific pieces of knowledge and shaping specific forms of behavior, whereas education focuses on the development of fundamental concepts and basic capacities; and while training sometimes may be accomplished rather quickly, real education simply cannot be rushed. For instance, a young child can be taught to recite a few verses from "Hamlet," but it still will be many years before she will truly understand and appreciate what Shakespeare was saying. And in most cases when very young children are engaging in some kind of "amazing" academic activity, it is highly likely there is a similar lack of anything substantial or significant underlying their behavior.

But what about a basic academic task such as reciting the alphabet – isn't it helpful for a child to learn that as soon as possible?

Not really. Again, many parents are fooled because a two- or three-year-old child who sings the alphabet song seems to have acquired an important "pre-reading" skill. But if you talk to the child, you find out that she simply has learned a pleasant little melody. She thinks "elemeno" (L-M-N-O) is one letter, and she thinks "N" comes between "Y" and "Z" (W, X, Y 'n Z). It's okay to make the song part of a pleasurable play activity; however, to the extent that it becomes a strong focus before the child is truly ready to understand and appreciate what letters are all about, and to the extent that it takes time away from the child's exploration, investigation, and experimentation through play, it certainly cannot be considered as promoting educational progress.

In what ways does learning to learn through play lead to much better results?

A young child who is fully exposed to the power of play receives a lot of genuine and enduring advantages. First, she has a chance to build strong educational foundations by developing a broad knowledge base and universal skills. Second, she has an opportunity to maximize her potential by developing an abundance of imagination and creativity. And third, the entire learning process becomes self-sustained because her natural love of learning is preserved and enhanced. Furthermore, along with ensuring her academic success, the power of play promotes her ultimate happiness by providing big benefits in the equally important areas of interpersonal relationships and self-esteem.

How does play help to build strong educational foundations?

Educational development proceeds horizontally as well as vertically, so "earlier" rarely indicates "better." Because higher levels of learning are built upon lower ones, it is critical that each level be allowed to become wide and firm before a child jumps to the next. If parents take the appearance of fundamental concepts and capacities as a sign to push their child

up to more sophisticated ones immediately, whatever new ones she subsequently acquires will be standing on shaky ground and soon will disintegrate. But if they encourage her to exercise those fundamental concepts and capacities fully and freely through developmentally appropriate play, she eventually will be much better prepared to collect – and keep – the more sophisticated ones that will come along in due time.

What is an example of inadequate horizontal development resulting in unstable vertical development?

During the early years, children learn to recognize and identify various characteristics – shape, for instance. Let's say a young child successfully places the square peg in the square hole on a form board; so her parents employ flashcard drills to move her rapidly forward. Gradually, with great effort, she learns to distinguish a trapezoid from an obelisk; and her parents presume she is now "advanced" with regard to her readiness for subjects such as geometry. However, all they really have done is fill her head with pre-formulated answers to selected questions; and the complicated shape-sorting scheme they have poured into her head will eventually fall apart. Consequently, when the child is introduced to geometry over a decade later, she may remember the name of an unusual shape or two, but she will be starting from scratch with respect to almost every important aspect of this subject.

How would learning to learn through play produce more desirable long-term results?

Let's say that instead, the parents simply let their child play with the form board in a relaxed and enjoyable manner. She might put the square peg in the square hole over and over again, she might spend some time attempting to put the square peg in the round hole, and she might carry the pieces around with her as she explores, investigates, and experiments with other materials. She won't know what a trapezoid or an obelisk is right away, but she will have a chance to perfect her basic shape-sorting ability and to use it in conjunction with other concepts

and capacities like color, spatial relations, logic, and labeling. Then, when she is introduced to geometry later on, she will have a large and diverse collection of information and ideas plus a large and diverse collection of finely-tuned skills – all of which she can use to quickly and easily master all the intricacies of this sophisticated new subject.

Why is nurturing imagination and creativity necessary to maximize a child's potential?

Training a young child to master specific subjects typically involves little more than rote memorization and imitation. Using such methods, you may be able to teach a young child everything you know. But even if you are a professor at a prestigious university, is this really the best you can do for her? Suppose our ancestors merely passed on the knowledge and skills they possessed – we would still be stuck in the Stone Age. Developmentally appropriate play, on the other hand, involves freedom, flexibility, fascination, and fun; and it is these elements that inspire a young child to develop the unbounded imagination and unbridled creativity which will enable her not only to function, but flourish too. As a result, she ultimately will be able to master problems and projects far beyond what you may have managed to contemplate.

How is a young child's love of learning related to play?

Developmentally appropriate play respects the notion that young children need to approach new concepts and capacities at their own pace and in their own way. During the early years, the rate and pattern of development both vary enormously from child to child; so all children who are doing well are not always doing the same thing at the same time. If a young child's experience is largely restricted to a highly-structured environment where she is required to pursue specific tasks within specific periods, it may be the case that these demands constantly run contrary to her individual interests and abilities of the moment. Consequently, learning soon becomes nothing more than a dreadful chore to be completed solely to obtain adult approval instead of an exciting adventure leading to personal fulfillment.

Is there a similar connection between play and self-esteem?

There certainly is. Although it may be unintentional, rigorous academic training often puts tremendous pressure on a young child to meet specific performance standards. To the extent her individual rate and pattern of development do not conform precisely to those standards, she is set up to fail. Gradually, the disappointment she senses from her parents and teachers will be internalized; and this invariably leads to an erosion of her self-image and eventually to a cessation of progress. On the other hand, when she is encouraged to educate and enjoy herself through developmentally appropriate play, she gets to succeed on a regular basis. And each success she has not only brings her enormous self-satisfaction, it spurs her on to eagerly embrace the next challenge as well.

How does play promote healthy interpersonal relationships?

During the early years, a child needs to learn about the world and how it works; but she also needs to learn about the people in that world and how to get along with them. When the emphasis on scholastic activities is too heavy, social skills typically get negated – or at least neglected – because peers are usually "competitors" instead of "companions" in the learning process. As a result, children who are placed in strictly academic settings too soon often turn out to be loners or misfits who are not comfortable with or adept at interpersonal relationships. However, when a good portion of a young child's educational development takes place in an atmosphere where her peers are playmates rather than rivals, she is more inclined and much better able to pick up the knack of sharing, cooperating, making friends, and other valuable forms of social interchange.

Are you saying that anything other than play will be detrimental to a child's educational development during the early years?

I'm not suggesting a child play exclusively, just extensively. It's all about emphasis and balance.

The younger the child, the more basic and variable her educational requirements; and therefore, the more time she needs to pursue her emerging interests and exercise her growing abilities in a free-form fashion. As she gets older, formal instruction in an academic setting will gradually become more appropriate, and picking up specific knowledge and skills will become increasingly important. However, she will always benefit by having opportunities to practice and apply whatever she has learned at her own pace according to her own inclinations. That is, play is necessary to firmly establish the learning process in the beginning; and it is necessary to fully enhance the learning process later on.

Isn't it possible to make academic tasks fun so that a child is still "playing" while pursuing intellectual activities?

Academic tasks can (and should be) fun. However, it must be noted that young children are not "intellectual" creatures. For the first two years of life, they tend to deal with the world almost exclusively through their senses and their motor movements rather than through "thinking." Then, for the next two or three years, although they are developing "mental" capacities, they are most comfortable employing and perfecting these capacities through activities that have a "physical" base. It's like people who are blind from birth and then have an operation to give them sight later in life. For a few years, they still touch everything. They have sight, but it takes a while for them to become fully comfortable with and confident in this new capacity; so they much prefer to start using it in conjunction with a capacity they know they already know how to employ and can trust.

With all this emphasis on play, are you implying that adult involvement is non-essential during the early years?

On the contrary, it is critical. However, while the parents and teachers of outstanding students are not idle bystanders in the early learning process, it is clear they serve primarily as helpful "partners" and occasional "consultants" instead of intrusive and controlling "instructors." First, they introduce the

children to open and inviting environments. Next, they observe carefully as the children independently explore, investigate, and experiment through play activities. Then, they simply supply assistance, elaboration, encouragement, and enthusiasm in response to the children's particular requirements of the moment.

Why is such a relaxed attitude so important in promoting optimal educational development during the early years?

The easiest way to educate a young child is to let her learn what she wants to learn when she wants to learn it. So when adults impose their own agenda on a young child's activities instead of simply following her lead, they are more likely to jeopardize rather than promote her educational progress. For example, let's say a mother and father find their child flipping through the pages of a book for the first time. If they are too anxious and too academically-oriented, they may misinterpret what is happening and rush out to buy the complete works of Dr. Seuss so they can start reading lessons. But at this point, the child may not have the attention span to sit still for long stories or possess the memory capacity to follow plots. Consequently, the result will be frustrated teachers and a discouraged student who will merely learn to dislike books.

How would "consulting partners in play" handle this situation differently?

If they are oriented toward developmentally appropriate play, the parents will be less obsessed with presently irrelevant things like literacy, and more focused on their child's interests and abilities of the moment. They are likely to realize her initial fascination with books is based on her fondness for operating simple mechanisms and that the hinge action of the book binding is irresistible to her. They will simply let her turn the pages back and forth, and perhaps expose her to a related item such as the lid of a lunchbox. The result will be an experience that is both enjoyable and enriching; and at the appropriate point in the future, the child will be able to regard her introduction to reading as a new adventure with her old friends.

How are parents supposed to know what types of play opportunities will be most educationally appropriate for their child?

In order for play opportunities to be as exciting, enriching, and enjoyable as possible, they must be accurately matched to a child's dramatically different interests and ever-increasing abilities at each stage of her early development. Unfortunately, the assessments, predictions, and judgments involved in this process are not always easy to make. After all, children don't come with owner's manuals. Therefore, whenever parents consider their child's educational development, they should consider their own educational development as well. A program that invites and encourages a mother and father to play and learn right along with their child will invariably be far more productive than one that focuses exclusively on the child.

Why is participation by an actively involved parent more effective than anything that can be provided by a professional alone?

Anxious parents often are inclined to turn over all responsibility for their young child's educational development to professionals. But it is critical to keep in mind that no one is better qualified to be that child's first and most influential teacher than her own mother and father. A professional can be expected to have expertise concerning young children in general; but the ultimate experts on any individual child will always be her parents. No one else is as finely attuned to her unique rate and pattern of progress, no one else is as keenly aware of her particular interests and abilities of the moment, and no one else has her best interests closer to heart.

Some academically-oriented programs make very convincing claims – how can parents be confident that play is truly a better approach?

Sometimes it is difficult for parents to resist programs that promise to produce precocious academic performance during the early years. But in order to guarantee their child the best chance for happiness and success in life, they must recognize that these programs tend to focus on the fears and

anxieties of mothers and fathers instead of the developmental nature and needs of young children. Furthermore, although they may appear impressive, a closer look reveals they typically are based upon questionable assumptions rather than established records of effectiveness; and they often involve potentially hazardous practices which violate many essential principles of early learning as determined by the most reliable research on the subject.

How would you summarize all that you've said about the power of play?

Enrolling a young child exclusively in activities with a heavy academic emphasis may result in that child being temporarily capable of what seem like remarkable scholastic accomplishments. However, it is unlikely the long-term outcome will include solid educational foundations, impressive imagination and creativity, a strong love of learning, good social skills, and healthy self-esteem – all of which are required to ensure the child's ultimate happiness and success. Also, as time goes by, a child will have ever-increasing chances and a steadily growing capacity to improve her prospects through formal instruction in specific academic subjects. But early childhood constitutes her once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to benefit fully from the power of play.

Do you have any additional words of wisdom for parents who are committed to promoting their young child's educational progress?

I would just like to pass on some advice from a couple of people much wiser than I. Socrates, the revered philosopher and renowned teacher, once said, "Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel." And my mother, a profound philosopher and magnificent teacher in her own right, added to this by noting, "Education is far too important to be left in the hands of the schools." So always keep in mind that throughout life, and especially during the early years, educational development is sparked by excitement, enthusiasm, and enjoyment; and that those sparks can be fanned into a roaring fire when a child and her parents regularly participate in activities that feature a lot of freedom, flexibility, fascination, and fun.

About the Author

Michael K. Meyerhoff, Ed.D., earned his doctorate in human development from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, where he also served as a researcher with the Harvard Preschool Project. He has conducted workshops on "Educating the Infant, Toddler, and Preschooler" throughout the United States and Canada; and he has been instrumental in developing several innovative parent preparation and support programs – most notably, the state of Missouri's "New Parents as Teachers" project.

Dr. Meyerhoff is co-author of The *Complete Book of Parenting*, a popular entry in the "Consumer's Guide" series from Publications International, and a contributing author in *Experts Advise Parents*, a best-selling anthology published by Delacorte Press. His articles have appeared in numerous publications for parents and professionals, including *Baby Talk, American Baby, Parent & Preschooler, Young Children, Healthy Kids, Psychology Today, and Educational Leadership*.

Dr. Meyerhoff has received a first-place National Headliner Award for his "Family Counselor" column in *Hemispheres*, the monthly magazine of United Airlines; he is a featured columnist in *Pediatrics for Parents;* and his regular column for *Parent & Child* has twice been awarded the first-prize citation from Parenting Publications of America. In addition, his expertise on early development and parenting has been quoted extensively in *Time, Newsweek, U.S. News & World Report, The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, and Reader's Digest*.

Dr. Meyerhoff makes frequent guest appearances on radio and television programs such as *Mother's Day* and NBC's *Today Show*. He is on the editorial advisory board of *First-Time Parents*, a special series of magazines distributed by K-III Publications; and he is a charter member of the panel of child development specialists compiled by *USA Today* to produce timely features on current topics of interest to mothers and fathers. He recently has been appointed Adjunct Professor of Early Childhood by the National College of Education.

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